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ABSTRACT

Composition teachers should combine self-identification and direct political action by belonging to the labor movement and working collectively toward expanding its range and power and consequently their own. Previously, members of the composition faculty have been involved in the labor movement, but several obstacles may interfere with deeper commitment. Barriers include: (1) the perception of many teachers that identification with the labor movement carries the taint of self-interest; (2) little understanding of organized labor's 20th century successes, in particular the heightening of respect for the working class; and (3) the perceived status of the labor movement as common rather than academic. Benefits of supporting organized labor would include improvements in wages and working conditions, increased job satisfaction, a renewed sense of public agency, and a more promising field for a progressive public agenda. (EF)

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Composition Teachers and the Labor Movement

(Part of a ROUNDTABLE session on The Politics of Academic Labor in Composition)

I want to say a few words this afternoon in favor of composition teachers joining the American labor movement. I am not speaking of *studying* the labor movement, though I think that's a good idea. And I'm not speaking of *supporting* the labor movement, though that, too, I endorse. I am speaking, rather, of a combination of self-identification and direct political action, of composition teachers *belonging* to the labor movement and working collectively toward expanding its, our, range and power.

Obviously, I'm not trying to start a trend here. Among one large segment of composition teachers, full-time faculty at public colleges and universities, unionization is already dominant (Rhoades and Slaughter 44). And at least for the last decade, Composition has been notable for its labor activism, particularly among graduate students and adjunct faculty, across the country and within all sorts of institutions. What is very unclear, however, is whether this new activism

CS 217 168

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is going to be consistently and deeply linked to a commitment to the larger US labor movement.

I hope that such a commitment will be made, but I see several reasons why it might not. For one thing, I think that in the eyes of many composition teachers identification with the labor movement carries the taint of self-interest. In common with many liberal academic enterprises, Composition, because it has serious difficulty imagining what *collective* self-interest might be, tends to counterpose against the bad guy of *individual* self-interest the good guy of professional responsibility and solicitude. We see this phenomenon at work, for example, in a tradition extending at least from Wayne Booth to Sharon Crowley that calls upon comfortable tenure-tracked faculty to fight for improved working conditions for adjunct faculty (see also Schell). What, I'm *against* this? Of course not, but I think that the let's-*us*-support-*them* formulation is telling. Meanwhile, P.D. Lesko, the Executive Director of the National Adjunct Faculty Guild, proposes that the only way to "support" part-time faculty is to make them full-time (see also Mattson).

Ironically, another potential barrier to composition faculty's identification with the labor movement is too little understanding of organized labor's 20th-century *successes*. In a recent 3 C's article, Debra Hawhee laments that our "working class status" is something composition teachers may never escape (522). Certainly many composition workers are grossly exploited, but, as the

20th-century history of industrial, craft, and professional organized labor might suggest, there is nothing *inherent* in "working class status" that ought to connote either penury or powerlessness.

And there are perhaps other obstacles to composition teachers' identification with the labor movement, one of which may be that the labor movement is common. It requires no arcane knowledge; it is open to all. It is everyday and is perhaps not, thus, "academic." Well, we all have multiple identities, but in advocating that one of our self-identifications be with the labor movement, I am proposing nothing that is either revolutionary or utopian. In fact, I mostly agree with Richard Miller's idea that composition teachers ought to work within the system. It's just that, while I see the value of our being canny bureaucrats (Miller 104-05), I place much *greater* value in our being academic workers who are committed to the labor movement —which is also part of "the system."

Not counting improvements in wages and working conditions, I see two major advantages in composition teachers identifying ourselves as part of the labor movement: increased job satisfaction and a renewed sense of public agency. Though attempts have been made, corporate restructuring of the academic workplace has not yet figured out how to replace composition teachers with machines. In any future I can foresee, formal writing instruction will remain largely labor-intensive, a matter of teachers and students working together, though not always in classrooms. The task for composition teachers is thus not to stay employed; it is, rather, to engage in local but collective deliberations about how

this work can be made not just more remunerative but more intellectually and emotionally rewarding for the human beings involved in it. This is what labor movements do.

And, along with greater attention to and respect for workplace democracy (in which no one, no individual, always wins), composition teacher's affiliation with the labor movement can provide a much more promising field for a progressive public agenda than, for example, our largely hidden efforts to uncover the hidden workings of ideology. An analogy. Five miles from where I live in Pennsylvania's Monongahela Valley, the Clairton Coke Works of USX, formerly United States Steel, throughout much of the last hundred years polluted the air and water around it with a carcinogenic mix of coke oven discharges so toxic that it denuded some of the surrounding hills down to the last blade of scrubgrass. Though the pollution continues, it has been substantially reduced in the last twenty years. What finally began to reverse the daily disaster was not so much either community protest or EPA sanctions, though they played a part. What finally made the difference was the United Steelworkers union telling the corporation, about 1980, Look, no more holding our jobs hostage to your polluting. *We* are the public; it's *our* members who are getting cancer, *our* neighborhoods that are being destroyed. It's *our* environment. My inference for composition teachers has to do only partly with the public power of organized labor.

My point has to do also with imagining our work as *in* a public realm that, collectively, we have both reason and capacity to help shape (see Horner). And

this is why in advocating that composition teachers join the labor movement I have not offered as a reason for doing so that we (or many of us) have been particularly exploited or oppressed in our work. It's true, we (or many of us) *have* been unusually exploited and disrespected professionally. But I would no want for that reason to cut ourselves off from other academic workers or from the larger labor movement.

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